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Non-Traditional Students: German and Indian Mature Women in Higher Education⁷

Abstract: Over the past decades, the number of non-traditional students attending higher education has grown worldwide. Governments and institutions encourage underrepresented students to enrol, often with two main goals: to boost national economic competitiveness and to enhance social inclusion in higher education for traditionally excluded groups, like older students. There is neither a policy nor academic consensus on what constitutes a mature student (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). In this study, we define mature women students as being 21 years or older when starting a bachelor's degree. The analysis of seven interviews conducted in Germany and India compares their sociodemographic profiles, their motivation for university study, the barriers they had to overcome, and the mechanisms of support they could count on, following the comparative method developed by Egetenmeyer (2012). The results show how structural conditions can facilitate or hinder mature women's access to and persistence in higher education.

Keywords: higher education, mature women, Germany, India.

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Introduction

Globalization has affected economies worldwide, pushing for innovation and production advancements in all markets and industries. The “Knowledge Society”, as defined by Manuel Castells in the 1990s, has been forging continuous educational policies aiming to increase VET and higher education investment. The job market is pressured for a lifelong learner workforce perspective aiming to support organizations’ competitiveness. In the age of market competition, including the creation of economic blocs like EU, BRICS, and Mercosur, all workers are expected to develop new skills and participate in adult education activities to be successfully included as an “economically productive asset”. This “Lifelong Learning Turn” increased adults’ participation at every education level, including most ages and all genders.

Following this scenario, women were called upon to join the workforce as job markets expanded, but this call kept them in a secondary position, working in less paid, gendered jobs. Although this movement led them to gendered education pathways, women’s educational attainment undeniably increased substantially, especially in tertiary education. Between 1995 and 2018, female enrolment in higher education (HE) tripled globally, with women becoming overrepresented in 74 per cent of the countries from most regions, surpassing male enrolment in the same period (UNESCO, 2021).

Despite this increase in women’s HE enrolment, older women and working women remain underrepresented in the so-called group of non-traditional students. The student profiles included in this blurred category of non-traditional students vary depending on the institutional context and even global regions. What disabled, low-income, first-generation, ethnic minorities and mature students have in common is that they are part of “social groups that remain under-represented groups in HE in each national context” (Finnegan et al., 2014), and their trajectories in HE are affected by diverse intersectional factors (Finnegan et al., 2014).

Historically, adult education research has neglected intersectionality perspectives (Merrill & Fejes, 2018) but has more recently looked at the intersectionality of gender and age and other inequalities that have influenced women’s experiences in adult education in general and in HE in particular (Finnegan et al., 2014).

In the German context, the term non-traditional student has no uniform definition. It usually describes students who entered HE via second or third educational pathways, meaning those who gained university entry qualifications through routes other than the conventional learning trajectory (*Gymnasium* and

obtaining the *Abitur*), as explained in Freitag (2012). Another perspective on this non-traditional group of students in the German discourse involves higher social or institutional barriers, for example, due to family conditions or difficulties in the educational system (Teichler & Wolter, 2004). In the Indian context, no specific term is associated with non-traditional students in HE; nor does the concept feature as a category in educational policies.

Another problematic and important concept for this study is the category of mature students. Neither of the two countries offer a clear age mark to determine who is considered a mature student; the same is true of international institutions connected to the education field. To ensure comparability within this research group, we use the following definition of mature students in HE: “students [enrolled for the first time] admitted to undergraduate courses aged 21 or over and not immediately following full-time secondary studies” (O’Shea & Stone, 2011, p. 275).

This study aims to explore the experiences of a non-traditional group of mature women students in German and Indian HE institutions, applying a methodological design based on a biographical approach leading to an international comparative analysis (Egetenmeyer, 2012), based on Cross’s (1984) typology of barriers, Clayton and Smith’s (1987) motivational typology of re-entry women, and Colvin’s (2013) proposal of mechanisms of support.

The main research question is: “What are the motivations, personal and structural barriers, and support mechanisms mature women perceived and experienced when attending HE in German and Indian institutions?”

This chapter is structured into four sections. The first briefly presents Cross’s (1984) typology of barriers, Clayton and Smith’s (1987) motivational typology of re-entry women, and some supporting mechanisms the students identified. The second section provides an overall explanation of the methodological options, the third shows the country-specific empirical data, and the last section presents the comparative analysis of the two countries.

Mature Women in HE: Motivation, Barriers, and Support

Despite the profusion of European studies in different fields, such as education, psychology, sociology and management focusing on the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education, the experiences of mature women students remain the least explored among the non-traditional group, according to Mallia (2010). However, researchers, such as Merrill (2021), Merrill and Fejes (2018),

Merrill and Revers (2023), are among the academics who have been studying the gendered experiences of non-traditional students in HE in Europe and this new feminized face in HE participation.

Specifically, in Germany, it was possible to find a relevant number of studies dedicated to exploring non-traditional students' experiences in HE (Teichler & Wolter, 2004; Tieben, 2020; Wolter, 2013), but few that were devoted to mature women's experiences in German tertiary education (Guimarães Duarte et al., 2023).

In India, non-traditional students in general and mature women in particular are neither a policy nor a research category. However, the last decade was a productive one in researching women's profiles, roles, experiences and enrolments in Indian HE, as evident in Khanan (2023), Patel (2023), Singh and Kumar (2023), Varghese and Sabharwal (2023).

To overcome the restrictions for this study in terms of comparative analysis, it was crucial to define analytical categories that could support the substantial cultural differences between Germany and India, their gendered societal issues, and their educational cultures. For this purpose, the motivational typology by Clayton and Smith (1987) seemed to be a feasible choice, as the eight motives for university study identified in their research with undergraduate re-entry women could encompass these cultural differences (Figure 1). The motives are vocational, self-actualization, knowledge, family, self-improvement, humanitarian, social, and role.

As varied structural and institutional limitations were identified in the literature review on mature women's experiences in HE, another analytical framework was selected to complement the motivational typology and to cope with the barriers and constraints faced by older women pursuing tertiary education. The typology of restrictions for accessing education identified by Cross (1984, p. 99) proposes three different types of barriers: situational (related to structural factors), institutional (related to educational organizations), and dispositional (related to individual attitudes and motivations).

Another category of analysis identified from the literature review is mechanisms of support, which women often report having or expecting to have, to incentivize and aid them to start, maintain and complete their HE studies. According to Colvin (2013), there are two types of support women can count on: a) personal/private mechanisms – related to family, friends, and peers; and 2) institutional mechanisms – linked to the policies, programs, and initiatives run by HE institutions to improve mature women students' experiences in their education pathways.

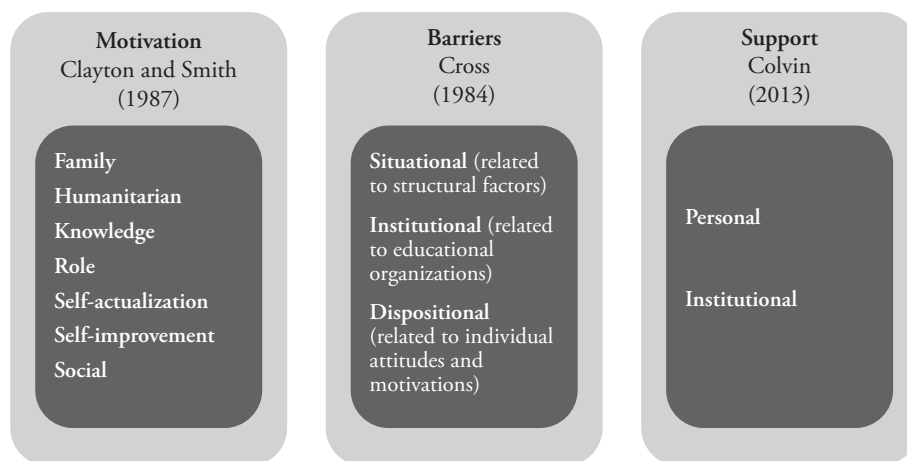


Figure 1. Categories and subcategories of analysis

Methodology

What types of motivation, personal and structural barriers, and support mechanisms are perceived and experienced by mature women when attending HE in German and Indian institutions? That is the research question we aim to answer in this study.

Methodologically, our research aligns itself with a constructivist and hermeneutic perspective. Assuming that women's educational experiences are unique, personalized, and framed by personal characteristics, cultural background, social structures, and gender-contextualized issues, a biographical approach combined with semi-structured interviews as a data collection method was the adequate option to give voice to these women and to know their realities.

The interviews were carried out with mature women students enrolled in an undergraduate course for the first time. The empirical corpus comprised three interviewees in Germany and three in India. The students were selected through convenience sampling (Guerra, 2006). All the participants were between the ages of 26 and 56 and were married or in a relationship. They were all mothers, some with young children.

All ethical considerations, including the confidentiality and anonymity procedures, were shared with the interviewees, who gave their consent. The interviews were 30 minutes long on average and audiotaped, transcribed, categorized, and analyzed using a content analysis method (Bardin, 1988), first regarding the

content of each country and second, through a comparative analysis between countries based on Egetenmeyer's proposal (2012).

The three categories supporting the content analysis relied upon a) motivations, b) barriers (broken down into situational, institutional, and dispositional) and c) support mechanisms (personal and institutional).

The comparative analysis was structured on Egetenmeyer's proposal (2012) and followed four phases: 1) descriptive juxtaposition, 2) analytical juxtaposition, 3) descriptive comparison, and 4) analytical comparison, based on the interpretation of the similarities and differences between the findings of the two countries on the meso level (institutional) and micro level (individual), as described in Figure 2.

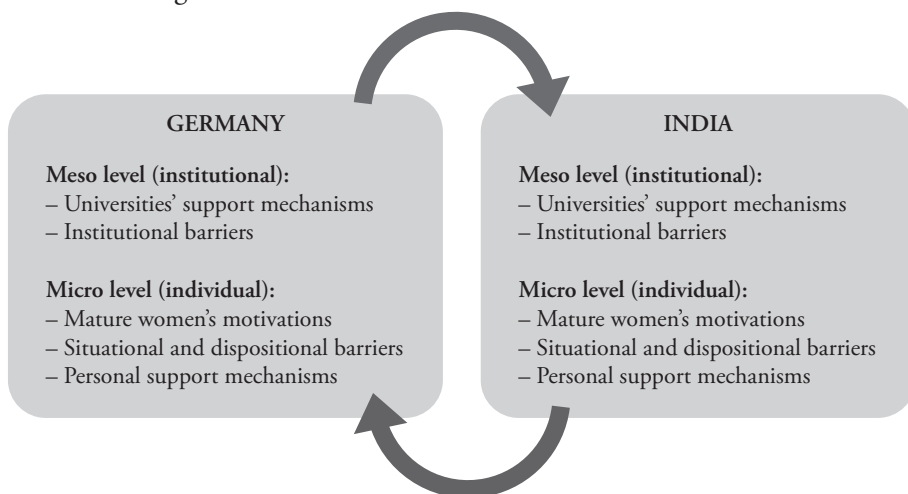


Figure 2. Analytical approach, categories, and levels of analysis

Mature Women in Higher Education in Germany

Higher education system

German pupils attend primary school from age six to ten. After primary school, lower secondary education is divided into three paths: *Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, and *Gymnasium*. In addition, there are mixed forms of these schools and separate schools for children with special needs. In upper secondary education, completed by pupils aged 17 to 19, the school-leaving certificate (Abitur) is also the university entrance qualification. The Abitur is the highest school-leaving certificate in Germany.

Graduates of other types of schools completed after lower secondary education are eligible to enrol in dual vocational training programs. Dual vocational training programs combine school-based vocational education and company-based vocational training. If the Abitur is used to access general higher education, the final grade determines entrance to specific acclaimed courses through the *numerus clausus*. It is also possible to earn the Abitur via second route education in evening schools or educational institutes and thus acquire a higher education entrance qualification. In addition, an examination up to the level of master craftsman can be completed after dual vocational training, which also provides access to higher education under certain conditions. However, this can be linked to the conditions of a subject-related and open-enrolment course of study. Therefore, students without an Abitur or a comparable qualification face barriers even with a master craftsman's certificate. Students on this path are considered non-traditional students in the relevant German literature (Wolter, 2022, p. 32). The roots of this definition lie in the development of the German education system. In this context, academic education was reserved for the upper social class, who attended the *Gymnasium* (Wolter, 2022, p. 28).

The early tracking in the German school system sets up students early for their later path, with the classical educational path after the *Gymnasium* including an academic career (Wolter, 2022, p. 27). Because of the lifelong learning discourse, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research has aimed to open university entrance to people without this certificate through two strategies (see e.g. Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichtserstattung, 2020). First, people with vocational competencies should have the opportunity to have their qualifications credited towards a degree. Second, people with vocational qualifications should have easier access to higher education. In this context, the Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichtserstattung (2020, p. 193) data show that students with only vocational qualifications continue to account for only 4 per cent of the HE student body.

Studying in Germany costs little in relation to GDP. The GDP in 2022 was \$48,636.03 per capita (Statista Research Department [Statista], 2023). The student services fee stands at €120–350 per semester, depending on location and university, and is distinct from tuition fees. Public universities do not charge tuition generally. The semester fees often cover, for example, public transportation passes. Unlike public universities, private institutions do charge tuition fees, usually in the low to mid five-digit range for the entire course of study. Tuition fees at private universities can range from €3,000 to €9,000 per semester (Ruthven-Murray, 2012, p. 73).

Enrolment statistics

Germany's higher education landscape consists of approximately 385 public HE institutions and 113 private HE institutions (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichtserstattung, 2020, p. 194). In the 2021/2022 winter semester, 871,764 male students and 777,613 female students were enrolled in bachelor's programs (Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis], n.d.). It is impossible to determine how many of the women enrolled in bachelor's programs are over 21 years old. However, data are available on the average age of female first-year students – it stood at 23.5 years in the winter semester 2021/2022 (Destatis, 2022). Data on students over 21 are only available without information on gender and degree sought. Accordingly, there are no precise data on the number of women over 21 in bachelor's programs at German HE institutions.

For Germany, data are also available on the gender distribution across fields of study at the bachelor's level, but those figures are not broken down by age groups. They show (Table 1) that male enrolment is substantially lower than female enrolment in the following fields: education, arts and humanities, social sciences, journalism and information, and health and social services. The numbers are nearly even in business, administration and law, natural sciences, mathematics and statistics, and service. Fields, such as information and communication technologies, engineering, manufacturing and construction, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary medicine, enrol only half to a quarter as many women as men. These data reveal the profound genderization of academic choices and, consequently, of future career paths.

Table 1. Enrolment by sex and field of study in Germany, winter semester 2022/23

Field of Study	Total	Women	Men
Pedagogy	165 913	131 581	34 332
Arts and humanities	177 928	111 900	66 028
Social sciences, journalism and information	168 163	104 488	63 675
Business, administration and law	499 321	257 708	241 613
Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics	155 957	71 465	84 492
Information and communication technologies	179 959	38 720	141 239
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	459 617	96 918	362 699
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and veterinary medicine	25 653	9 006	16 587
Health and social services	111 303	85 463	25 840
Services	58 526	27 727	30 799

Source: (Destatis, 2022)

Mature women's motivations, barriers, and mechanisms of support

Julia, Anne, and Danielle are mature working women, who have decided to embark on an academic path in HE to improve themselves and their professional careers.

Julia realized she wanted to train apprentices while working as a hairdresser. *“Training others has always been the most fun for me. I have trained a total of four apprentices”* (Julia). Furthermore, early in her professional career, she realized that her job as a hair and make-up artist was low-paid and physically demanding, and she decided to look for other vocational options and attend university. A bachelor degree in education was her option.

Anne is a nurse, but she has worked as an educator in vocational training for the nursing professions, at a pediatric nursing school. Recently, she felt she needed *“brain food, [...] So, to have to use my mind again, to have to make an effort”* (Anne), to learn something new. She wanted to make personal changes, to improve herself, as well as her career path. She decided to develop her teaching skills and knowledge by enrolling in a bachelor of education course.

Danielle felt constrained and unappreciated in her occupation as a nurse. She felt the need to obtain a university degree to make progress in her career that would allow her to show her abilities and skills and receive the acknowledgement she deserves: *“Also, later in my professional life, I always had a certain limitation in terms of responsibility and knowledge appreciation. It actually became a bit depressing”* (Danielle). Remaining faithful to her initial field of education, she is now enrolled in medical studies.

Julia, Anne, and Danielle are mainly driven by the desire to make personal changes and increase their professional career opportunities. According to Clayton and Smith's (1987, p. 93) typology, these mature women are motivated by self-improvement and vocational development. Of the three women, Danielle reveals the greatest dissatisfaction with her professional situation; her vocational motivation is more intensely expressed in her desire to change professions.

Danielle and Julia experienced institutional barriers (Colvin, 2013, p. 25). Julia had to cope with a “lack of access to information” (Colvin, 2013, p. 25). It was difficult for her to get access to information because of the remoteness of the university (around 100 km away from her home). Julia and Danielle both experienced “entrance [...] requirements” (Colvin, 2013, p. 25) as a barrier. Entrance requirements are interpreted as a barrier for Julia because, according to the German definition, she is considered a non-traditional student without an Abitur and therefore had to be admitted as one of the 4 per cent of non-traditional students in the applicant pool. Moreover, her choice of subjects was limited because, as a student without an Abitur, she was only allowed to pick courses without

a numerus clausus. Danielle's entrance requirements involved taking the entry exam (TMS) for admission to her study course, in addition to evidence of prior vocational training and occupation in the field. At this point, she only had one shot at passing the exam and beginning her studies: *"Nothing will be as bad as the TMS, because I simply don't have this competitive pressure anymore – I don't have to be better than others, that's what's so incredibly mean, that you really must be better than them. We always say it a bit jokingly, but it's like 'the TMS trauma runs deep'"* (Danielle). A large amount of Danielle's time is taken by doctor's appointments because of her visual disability and childcare responsibilities, which are often incompatible with her study schedule, even though she has been admitted to special seminar groups for parents. Parents are supposedly to be supported by being offered courses at times when children are typically in school or day care. This, however, is often not the case, wherefore some of the university courses are inaccessible to her: *"The most difficult thing for me in medical school is not the amount of learning material, because I can handle that. It's actually the organization of appointments, which is awfully difficult"* (Danielle). Like Danielle, Julia also experiences "scheduling issues" (Colvin, 2013, p. 25). She has difficulty attending university events at different times of the day because of her long commute and motherhood responsibilities: *"Sometimes I wish I had more flexibility. Sometimes you have a seminar in the morning and then again very late in the evening"* (Julia). This is especially annoying when she has long breaks between events and cannot go home because of the long commute. Anne did not list any institutional barriers.

All the women reported multiple situational barriers. Danielle and Julia both experience their "financial situation" as a problem. Especially Julia, who is dependent on federal financial aid (Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz – BAföG). However, the law requires recipients to finish within the standard period of study, which for a bachelor's degree is six semesters: *"Do I get BAföG, how much BAföG do I get?"* (Julia). A conflict emerges for Julia between being eligible for state support by completing the study course in due time and investing time into the care of her child. Julia's and Danielle's pregnancies and maternities can be categorised under "health" (Colvin, 2013, p. 22). Danielle's chronic illness also relates to the category of health. Moreover, Julia and Danielle both experience "home responsibilities" and "childcare" (Colvin, 2013, p. 22) as situational barriers at university. Julia also describes a role conflict, *"Of course I'm also a mum. [...] And I am also an employee. You wonder if you can manage it all"* (Julia). Anne reported that she did not face any barriers while entering higher education. All three women face problems in terms of commuting to university. Therefore, "commute" should be considered a new subcategory related to the situational barriers that mature women experience.

All the women we interviewed experienced doubts before or while entering higher education. According to Colvin (2013, p. 23), feeling too old is a common concern for mature women. For Anne and Julia, this problem referred mostly to not feeling like a young and traditional student. Anne assumed her age might be a problem, but she *“enrolled there, like any other person, and age was never really an issue”* (Anne). Nevertheless, they stated that their age and experience also gave them an advantage over the traditional younger students, as they embarked on their studies in a more structured and focused way due to their previous training and life experience. Anne’s doubts turned out to be unjustified as other students and professors treated her like any other student. Julia, on the other hand, experienced rejection because she was at university without an Abitur. She felt she was not being taken seriously by lecturers and that she was even actively discriminated against. The problem does not relate to ageist attitudes; rather, it should be considered a new subcategory related to dispositional barriers. The feeling of not being taken seriously is also an issue Danielle has experienced. She recognizes an *“area-wide discrimination against females or who are perceived as females”* (Danielle). All three women also experienced *“fear of failure”* (Colvin, 2013, p. 23). Julia and Anne had not studied intensively for a long time, which made them feel a bit uncomfortable in the beginning: *“I’ve got a bit of a problem with reproducing knowledge – maybe it is also because I’ve been in practice for so long and simply out of the classroom, that might also be the reason”* (Anne). In the beginning, they were overwhelmed with the quantity of content, but all of them found a way to cope with it.

The interviewees identified discrepancies between institutional support services their university claims to provide and the services that are actually delivered. Julia, for example, explained that while her university does offer parent-child rooms, these rooms are always locked and can only be opened on request by very few people who have the keys. To breastfeed one’s child during seminars is possible but not welcomed, so it is the easiest to do this in the cafeterias, for example: *“it was very difficult for you to get to seminars. [...] you already feel that this is not wanted.”* (Julia). The possibility to complete assignments remotely as an alternative to seminars exists in theory but is not facilitated by all lecturers. This can lead to BAföG funding problems if the standard study period cannot be met. Danielle reports similar issues. For example, her university offers parents special seminar schedules or emergency childcare facilities, but they are not operated the way they should be. While Julia benefits from WhatsApp groups for parents of all study courses, Danielle found the theoretical lecture for pregnant or breastfeeding women in lieu of practical anatomy lessons involving dangerous chemicals very helpful. Anne consulted an academic advisor for her study course before enrolling at the university. The advisor answered all her questions and encouraged

her to pursue a university degree despite her age, which Anne perceived as a very important push in the direction of finally enrolling in the course. It can therefore be said that institutional support mechanisms do exist, but that they are often inadequately implemented.

All the interviewed women can rely to varying degrees on the personal support of their family, friends, or employers (Colvin, 2013, p. 24). All the women name their husbands or partners as important sources of support: they helped them find suitable study programs, motivated them to enrol in higher education, and have helped financially and with childcare. *“My husband supports me, especially by saying again and again how great he thinks it is and on the other hand, of course, he motivates me again and again – especially now with the written assignments”* (Anne). *“So he takes on a lot of care work, he also supports me master the content, because he is a finished doctor and without him, my studies would not be so easy, I think”* (Danielle). Julia’s and Danielle’s own families and/or their partner’s families and even friends support them by caring for their children. Friends were also named as important motivators providing them with mental or emotional support. Fellow students are a valuable support mechanism for all the women we interviewed, especially for Danielle, who relies on her peers to aid her in overcoming the barriers she faces due to her visual impairment by helping her read and follow the lectures. She says: *“Without them, my studies wouldn’t work at all. They support me when my disability gets worse. They also support me by looking after my son”* (Danielle). Without them, she would not have been able to progress in her studies and in life the way she has. Julia feels supported by her employer, who is also her aunt, providing her with the necessary flexibility to choose her hours and working days. Danielle is also free to schedule her own working hours, but considers it a normal procedure at her workplace rather than special employer support. Anne worked and studied for two years, and, although her employer tried to accommodate her course schedule, it did not always work. Anne eventually felt it was easier for everyone to work with someone who was more flexible than a student, which is why she quit in the end.

Mature Women in Higher Education in India

Higher education system

The Indian education system is mainly divided into four parts – primary, middle, secondary, and higher education. Almost all students aged 18 and older enter HE after completing their secondary and senior secondary schooling. We do not

have the data on transition and dropout rates of Indian female students at higher secondary and higher education levels, but the transition and dropout rates of Indian female students from lower secondary (9–10) to higher secondary education stand at 79.3 and 12.3 per cent, respectively (Government of India, 2022b). These data illustrate the dire need for structural mechanisms to bring these dropout women back into the fold of education.

The HE enrolment of female students in India is closely related to parental education. According to Desai et al. (2010), illiterate parents believe that investing in their daughters' education is a waste of money and resources because their sons will support the family financially after they are employed; these parents hardly consider that their daughters can work and do the same. According to Anuradha et al. (1999), North Indian parents have traditionally had lesser expectations for their daughters' than for their sons' education. Higher education for women is also impeded by outdated and conservative local cultural norms and values. Parents believe that their primary role is to arrange their daughter's marriage, rather than provide for her education. As a result, the practice of early marriage in rural India severely affects the education of women (Channa, 2010).

The limited number of public universities is also a challenge for the underprivileged categories to access HE in India. There are huge disparities in fees between public and private universities. Marginalized women have difficult accessing public universities in low-income countries like India, where per capita income stands at less than \$2.5k.

Enrolment statistics

The Indian higher education system consists of public and private educational institutes. The public institutes are classified into three categories – central, state, and deemed-to-be universities – since education is in the concurrent list, which is shared by both federal and state governments. A total of 1,113 universities are registered in India. Out of these, 657 are government-supported (central government: 235, state government: 422), 10 are private deemed (aided), and 446 are private (unaided). There are 17 universities exclusively for women (14 state public universities, 2 private universities and 1 deemed private aided). In 2020–21, there were 16 open universities (1 central university, 14 state universities, and 1 state private university) and 112 dual mode universities.

Figures 3 and 4 show the total enrolment of women and men in Indian higher education, which clearly illustrates the increase of both men and women in higher educational institutes (Government of India, 2022c). According to the

2020–2021 All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) (Government of India, n.d.), a total of 21,237,910 women (48.7%) and 20,142,803 men (51.3%) were enrolled in HE.

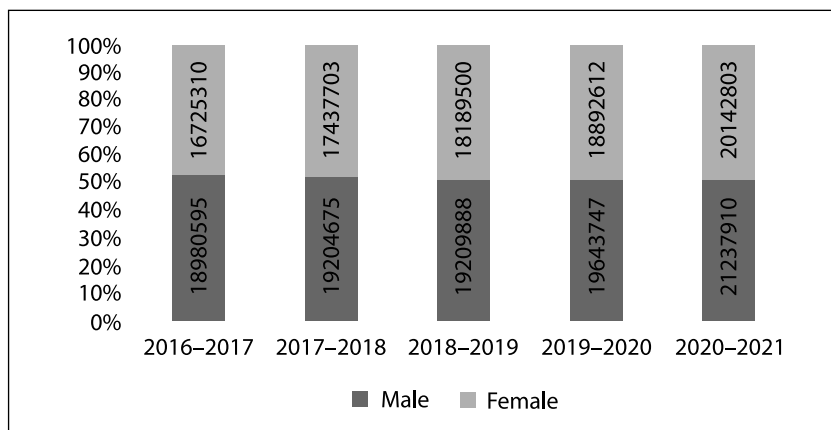


Figure 3. Gender-wise enrolment in higher education, (Government of India, n.d., p. 40)

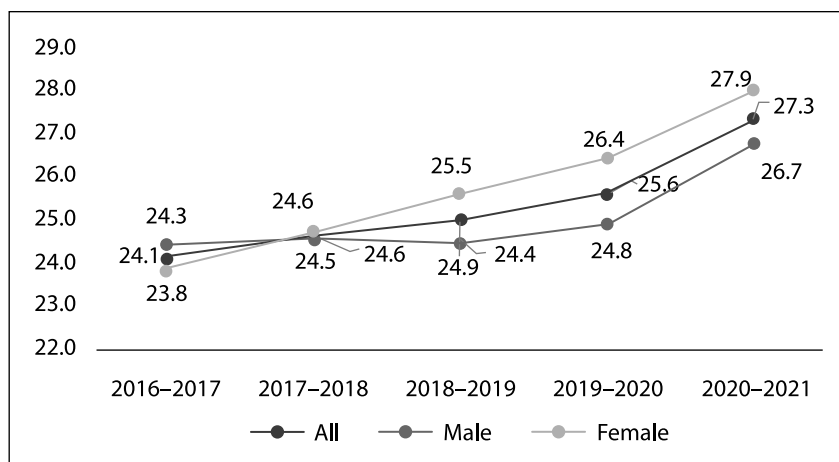


Figure 4. Gender-wise Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of last 5 years, (Government of India, n.d., p. 48)

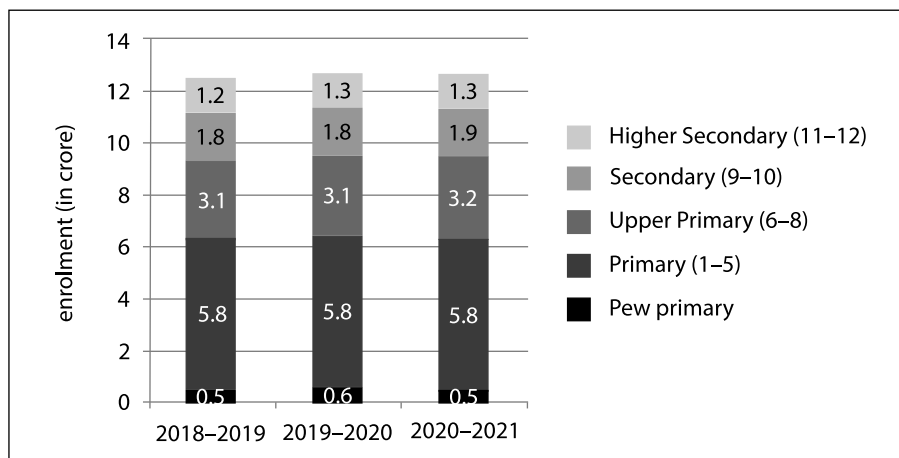


Figure 5. Enrolment of girls (in Crore), India from 2018–2019 to 2020–2021, (Government of India, 2022c, p. 13)

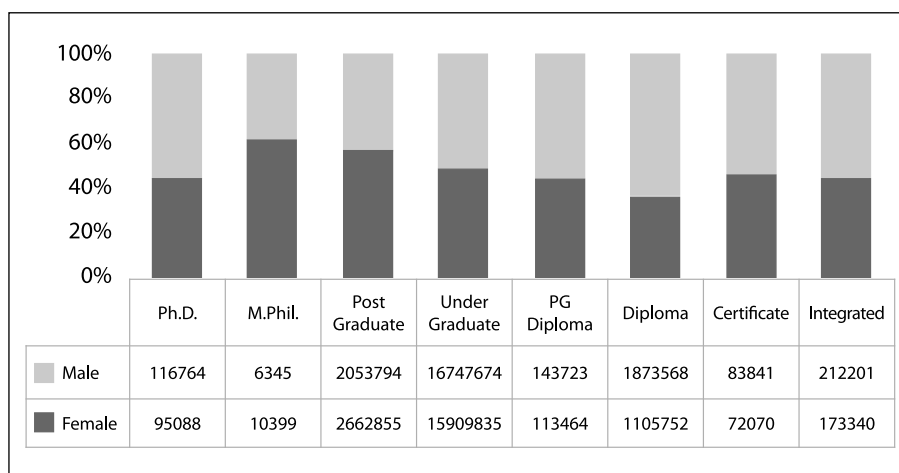


Figure 6. Gender-wise distribution of enrolment at different study levels, (Government of India, n.d., p. 13)

Comparison of the UDISE+ 2021–22 (Government of India, 2022b) (Figure 5) report with the AISHE report (Government of India, n.d.) (Figure 6) suggests an inferential argument regarding the female dropout rate in Indian HE. According to the data of UDISE+ (Government of India, 2022c), a total

of 1.2 crore female students were enrolled in higher secondary schools in India in the year 2018–19. If we compare these data to the enrolment of female students (>1.5 crore) in undergraduate courses from the 2020–21 AISHE report (Government of India, n.d.), we can find more than 40 lakhs new admissions to undergraduate courses of higher educational institutes. These can be the dropout women who re-entered educational institutions to continue their studies. These numbers might be higher because the transition rate of female students from higher secondary to undergraduate courses is not 100 per cent. True, the Indian government has made several efforts to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of females in educational institutions, but these initiatives primarily focus on girls in the younger age group and do not address the specific challenges faced by dropout women who wish to pursue higher education. Dropout women face several challenges in accessing and completing higher education, such as family responsibilities, financial constraints, lack of support systems, and societal attitudes towards women's education. To address these challenges, there is a need for policies that specifically target mature women and provide them with the necessary support to pursue higher education.

Motivations, barriers, and mechanisms of support

Savita, Padma, and Jayanti are married women and have parental responsibilities. Of the three, only Padma is engaged in paid employment. Family, which holds a very special significance in the lives of these mature women, emerges as their primary motivation to resume their academic journeys. Their goal is not to improve the material and financial conditions of the household, as proposed by Clayton and Smith (1987), but to support their children's educational path.

Savita is motivated by the changing scenario of her responsibilities. After getting married and becoming a mother, she felt an increasing responsibility to support her family. "*Growing responsibility for family needs and for giving the best life to my son, I decided to continue my studies*" (Savita) are her main reasons for attending HE. Family responsibilities, and the desire to provide better opportunities for their child have also motivated Padma to continue her studies. She recalled the situation when she aborted her studies after getting pregnant. Her marriage was arranged at the time she was working as a media/radio scriptwriter. She continued working after she married, but had to quit when she got pregnant. When her family situation became stable and her child got older, she decided to pursue a HE vocational course and have a paid job. Family is also Jayanti's main motivation to continue her studies. Since Jayanti (47) is the oldest respondent,

there is a huge time gap in her experience. She recalled the time when women did not have much freedom to choose what was right for them. *“But after several years, I found myself excluded from important family discussions. I felt embarrassed when my children asked me questions, and I didn’t know the answers. Also, when other society women talked about their educational orientations, I regretted discontinuing my studies. I decided to continue my studies to upgrade my knowledge, and to make peace with my children and family,”* (Jayanti).

Savita, Padma, and Jayanti experienced institutional barriers to some extent (Colvin, 2013). Savita explained that the *“By its 10th plan, the University Grant Commission in India introduced a childcare scheme to provide day care facilities for its employees and students. But this is a paid facility and not available in every department. I think every university should provide free childcare facilities for students so that more women can enrol in higher education programmes and keep up good attendance”*.

All the mature women had to contend with various situational barriers. Financial problems remain an important barrier for all of the interviewees due to the high costs of attending HE in light of the GDP per capita. They had difficulty balancing their family chores and formal education. Rural India is dominated by patriarchal norms and conservative values, which prevent women from going outside, meeting other people, and even showing their face to anyone. Jayanti had to cope with the *“lack of expectation from parents and family (...). But I continued my studies”*. According to Savita: *“In our village, no woman is allowed to pursue her schooling. I was very scared when I asked my husband and family for the first time. They said no but I didn’t give up. I was slapped and beaten many times for wanting to continue my studies. But, finally, at one point, they agreed”*. Likewise, these women highlighted as major challenges “dispositional barriers”, like devaluation of experience, fear of slow learning, and fear of what society and other students think about them.

All the barriers mature Indian women had to face could not be overcome without support provided by the institution itself, their family, parents, friends, and employers. All respondents were supported by their family and peers, but the first obstacle they faced was getting their support in the first place. Savita found that *“family support is mandatory for every dropout female to restart her academic journey. This is not limited to married women, even in rural areas, many unmarried girls were forced to discontinue their studies, because their family has other priorities”*. All interviewees agreed that they benefitted immensely from peer support. Since Padma was the only working woman before she started her studies, she said the same about employer support. Peers helped Padma to identify colleges/universities, choose courses, and sometimes encouraged her to persevere. Jayanti is also

very thankful to her friends, pointing out that her friend had even convinced her husband and family to support her decision.

Distance learning is identified by Indian mature women as the most important institutional mechanism of support to facilitate access to and persistence in HE. Padma agreed that open and distance learning mechanisms opened the door of opportunity for many dropout women. She suggested that *“university systems should add online lectures in their websites so that women such as housewives can easily take lectures on managing their time and work/when they have the time. Also, they should focus on making education more focused on skill and gender-sensitive to provide skills and value to non-traditional students”*. Such institutions offer support for women to pursue their studies hassle-free. They have prepared class schedules bearing in mind the time and availability and adopted a blended learning approach (both online and offline classes) to ensure maximum participation and attendance by such women.

Distance education and blended learning methods become a boon for these dropout women to pursue their academics effectively. This is why enrolment in distance education institutes is significantly increasing. Savita has benefitted from the blended learning approach adopted by institutes to benefit non-traditional students. Expressing her gratitude, she said, *“Professors from university support me in carrying out my studies hassle free. They prepared our class schedule bearing in mind our time and availability so that all of us can attend as many classes as possible; my department has also adopted a blended learning approach (both online and offline classes) to ensure the maximum participation and attendance”*. These challenges could not be overcome without support provided by the institution itself. Jayanti, who lives in a rural area, pointed out that her learning was difficult due to lack of institutional support, like childcare, special classes and service schedules, and special learning assessments. The statements of these mature women seem to suggest a relationship between HE attendance conditions and the territory, with women residing in urban areas reporting more favourable institutional conditions for their learning process.

Comparative Analysis: Being a Mature Women Student in HE

Looking at the discourses of German and Indian mature women attending HE, we can find more differences than similarities due to each country's social, cultural, and economic characteristics.

Germany is a highly developed European country with a well-established welfare regime and a strong economy. According to Esping-Anderson (1990), Ger-

many is a conservative-corporatist welfare regime, characterized by a high degree of coordination between the state, employers, and labor unions. Germany has an extensive social insurance system that covers various aspects of social protection, including healthcare, unemployment benefits, old-age pensions, and disability benefits, and a comprehensive healthcare system. Germany has strong labor market policies aimed at protecting workers' rights, including regulations on working hours, minimum wages, generous parental leave policies and a well-developed education and training sector in spite of rigorous early-age tracking. In German society, education and training can be considered as the most significant vehicles for promoting social mobility. Germany is a coordinated market economy and one of the world's largest and most advanced economies. Women's rights and gender discrimination in Germany, like in many countries, have evolved significantly over the years. Germany has a rich history of women's rights activism, with significant milestones dating back to the 19th century. Women in Germany gained the right to vote in 1918, and the Weimar Constitution of 1919 included provisions on gender equality. Germany has strong legal provisions on gender equality. Article 3 of the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) guarantees equal rights to all citizens regardless of gender. It prohibits discrimination based on sex. However, gender discrimination in the workplace remains an issue. Although women constitute a substantial share of the German workforce, they are often underrepresented in leadership positions and continue to face a gender pay gap (Tahir, 2020).

India is a diverse and complex country with a variety of characteristics in terms of its welfare regime, type of capitalism, social mobility, women's rights, and gender discrimination. India is the most populous country in the world. It is composed of 28 states where 1,721 different languages are spoken. The official languages are English and Hindi, although the former is spoken by a very small percentage of the population. India has a mixed welfare regime that combines elements of both a traditional welfare state and a market-oriented approach. The Indian government provides various social welfare programs and subsidies to address poverty and inequality, including schemes for healthcare, education, and food security. However, the effectiveness and coverage of these programs can vary widely. India became a powerful economy and a part of the BRIC countries with a state-permeated market economy (Schedelik et al., 2021).

India combines elements of both market capitalism and state intervention. While the country embraced market-oriented reforms and liberalization in the 1990s, the government still plays a significant role in various sectors, including banking, infrastructure, and public enterprises. Social mobility in India is a complex issue, and there are significant barriers to upward mobility. Education plays an important role in social mobility chances, especially for women, but the effect

of factors, such as caste, class, gender, and region, plays a crucial role in determining opportunities for social advancement (Vaid, 2016). India has made significant progress in recognizing and legislating women's rights. The Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to women, and various laws have been enacted to address issues such as dowry, domestic violence, and workplace harassment (Government of India, 2022a). However, the effective enforcement of these laws and social attitudes towards gender equality vary widely across the country (Saryal, 2014). Gender discrimination remains a pressing issue in India. Despite legal protections, women often face discrimination in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and within their families. Issues such as female feticide, child marriage, and sati continue to be prevalent in some parts of the country (Saryal, 2014).

Despite the importance of agency, the experiences of mature women who participated in this study are inseparable from the institutional, economic, and social arrangements in which they occur. It is not surprising, therefore, that the motivations that led to their enrolment in HE are quite different. Engaged in the job market, where they pursue a profession, mature German women explain their enrolment in HE by their desire to enhance their career advancement opportunities or even professional reorientation. Their self-improvement intent is clearly in the service of a vocational orientation aimed at improving their professional situation. Although the decision to resume their studies is legitimized by an intrinsic orientation driven by the desire for change and personal development, the primary reason is, without a doubt, of an extrinsic nature, aiming to increase career opportunities. To some extent, these women adhere to the principles of human capital theory and believe in the possibilities of professional mobility in a job market that values education and academic credentials. Unlike the German participants, only one Indian woman is engaged in the labor market and has a paid job. For mature Indian women who participated in the study, family is the primary motivation for pursuing higher education. However, their understanding of family differs from what is presented in the study by Clayton and Smith (1987). Their desire for self-improvement primarily aims to assist their children in their educational paths, rather than to contribute to the family budget, as seen in Clayton and Smith's (1987) research. In this sense, their enrolment in HE is not an individual investment in obtaining qualifications that can be negotiated in the labour market, but rather an individual decision, the returns of which will be felt in the increased educational opportunities for their children.

The women from both countries mention the existence of institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers (Colvin, 2013), although these take on, in some cases, different configurations depending on the country. From an institutional perspective, mature women in both countries converge in identify-

ing issues related to schedules unfriendly towards women, and the absence of childcare facilities or the difficulty of accessing them when they do exist at the institution they attend. The most significant situational barriers in the lives of mature women in both countries are the balance between education and family and financial issues, which are particularly important in Indian society, where fees, even in public universities, are very high considering the per capita GDP. All the interviewed women had doubts before or at the time of enrolment in HE. However, what distinguishes women from the two countries the most is the struggle that Indian women had to endure to gain the right to access HE and overcome their families' negative expectations. In terms of dispositional barriers, these women not only had to deal with fear of failure, but also had to overcome the prejudices of a deeply patriarchal society where women's rights are still far from being respected, especially in rural areas (Saryal, 2014).

All the women identify mechanisms of institutional support (Colvin, 2013), although in some cases, they criticize their ineffectiveness. However, the significant difference lies in the importance that mature Indian women attach to distance education. This modality seems to play a crucial role in their access to education, especially in rural areas, as it allows them to bypass traditional values that limit women's freedom of movement while facilitating the balance between education and family responsibilities. Finally, all the women report the existence of individual support mechanisms where friends, colleagues, and even employers play an active role. A major difference lies in the complete absence, as mentioned by the Indian women, of any reference to effective support from husbands or even extended family. True, they had to rely on the support of their husbands because otherwise, they would not be studying, but this support amounts to nothing more than consent in a society marked by patriarchal values and a deep division of domestic labor along gender lines.

Final Remarks

The research results require particular caution given the limited number of interviews conducted. Despite this limitation, they point to some important aspects. Comparison of the experiences of mature women in two countries as different as Germany and India draws attention not only to the structure of opportunities but also to the dominant cultural values that affect their experiences in higher education. The identified differences, such as the significance attributed to the family as a motivational orientation by mature Indian women, or the weight of patriarchal values as a situational barrier that these women have to overcome,

highlight the ethnocentric nature of some of the theoretical propositions that underpinned this research.

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Žene kao netradicionalni studenti u visokom obrazovanju u Nemačkoj i u Indiji¹⁴

Apstrakt: Broj netradicionalnih studenata u visokom obrazovanju poslednjih godina raste širom sveta. Vlasti i visokoškolske institucije podstiču upis nedovoljno zastupljenih kategorija, često radi ostvarenja dva cilja: unapređenja nacionalne privredne konkurentnosti i jačanja socijalne inkluzije tradicionalno isključenih grupa, poput starijih studenata, u više obrazovanje. Ne postoji nijedna politika, a ni akademski konsenzus o tome šta se podrazumeva pod zrelim studentom (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). U ovoj studiji definišemo zrele ženske studente kao one koje su bile najmanje 21 godinu stare kada su počele osnovne studije. U analizi sedam intervju sprovedenih u Nemačkoj i Indiji se primenom komparativnog metoda koji je razvio Egetenmeyer (2012) poredi njihovi socijalno-demografski profili, njihova motivacija da studiraju, prepreke koje su morale da prevaziđu, kao i mehanizmi podrške na koje su mogle da računaju. Rezultati ukazuju na to kako sistemski uslovi mogu da olakšavaju ili osujećuju pristup zrelih žena višem obrazovanju i (ne) doprinose njihovoj istrajnosti da završe fakultet.

Ključne reči: više obrazovanje, zrele žene, Nemačka, Indija

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